



National Day Nurseries Association

★Brighter thinking
for early years

Factsheet

A close-up photograph of a young girl with dark hair in pigtails, wearing a blue and white striped shirt. She is holding a large magnifying glass over her right eye, looking directly at the camera with a focused expression. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a library or classroom setting with bookshelves.

Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning

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The characteristics of effective teaching and learning were a component of the revised EYFS 2012 and have been a permanent feature in subsequent revised versions. They were described as;

‘the ways in which the child engages with other people and their environment – playing and exploring, active learning, and creating and thinking critically – underpin learning and development across all areas and support the child to remain an effective and motivated learner.

Whilst the learning and development statements look at ‘what’ children learn the characteristics of effective teaching and learning focus on ‘how’ children learn, how you engage them emotionally, physically and cognitively in their play experiences.

Developing positive dispositions and attitudes to learning in a child’s earliest years can lay strong foundations for their future.

The Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning

The EYFS Statutory Framework (2021) identifies three characteristics of effective teaching and learning:

- **Playing and Exploring (Engagement)**
- **Active Learning (Motivation)**
- **Creating and Thinking Critically (Thinking)**

The characteristics are about how children engage with their environment, people and their learning experiences.

Why are they important?

The characteristics of effective learning represent the active role children adopt as they follow their curiosity and push themselves to become more competent and to understand more, and are rewarded by the inner satisfaction of mastering new skills and feeling their independence grow.

These learning dispositions, behaviours and habits of mind are particularly important in the EYFS because they build the foundations needed to support children to become strong lifelong learners and independent thinkers.

Birth to 5 Matters (2021)

How to support the Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning?

The EYFS Statutory Framework (2021) states *“In planning and guiding what children learn, practitioners must reflect on the different rates at which children are developing and adjust their practice appropriately”*.

Playing and Exploring (Engagement)

Playing and Exploring (engagement) - children investigate and experience things, and ‘have a go.’

Do you provide children with opportunities to follow their own interests, investigate areas of fascination, take risks in their play and to ‘have a go?’

The environment and resources you provide must offer opportunities for children to explore their passions and interests, make discoveries and build on their previous learning and experiences. Think about how you review children’s engagement in their play. Are all children actively engaged in their play? Are there any areas of the environment that are not being used by children and if so ask yourself why children are not engaging in this particular space? Talk to the children about what the space could become and plan together how you can organise the space and resources.

Do children have autonomy in their play? Children should have the time, space and opportunity they need to follow their interests and revisit projects to support their current interest. Ensure you provide open ended resources and look at how you encourage children to lead their play.

Supporting children to identify and manage risks in their play is an important responsibility for practitioners, helping children to manage risks gives them the life skills they need for the future. Review your play activities and think about how you support the following types of risks:

- **Physical** - by climbing a little higher, running a little faster, jumping a little further
- **Emotional** - feeling out of control or overcoming fear, choosing a song to sing for the first time, approaching a group to join their play
- **Mental** – overcoming obstacles, learning their own boundaries and that of the environment around them.

Creating a positive approach to risk is essential to provide meaningful learning opportunities for children, sensitively supported by staff who support and understand the benefits of risk in play. As children’s experiences grow so will their confidence in identifying and managing risks during activities and during their play experiences.

Active Learning (Motivation)

Active Learning (Motivation) - children concentrate and keep on trying if they encounter difficulties, and enjoy achievements.

Intrinsic motivation is critical to independent learning. Being motivated to get involved, to persevere during challenges and try to find solutions are all key aspects of learning and development.

Intrinsic motivation means doing something for yourself because you want to or are interested in doing so.

Extrinsic motivation means completing a task because you are going to receive an external reward. In an early years setting this could be stickers or praise from adults.

Think about what motivates children in your setting to choose resources, peers to play with, or the length of time they spend at activities etc.? Think about your own intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. You may run every evening because it makes you feel good and supports your wellbeing (intrinsic motivation) or you may be studying each evening to gain a qualification (extrinsic motivation).

Children are more engaged in activities when they are intrinsically motivated so review the balance of child led/adult led activities that you currently offer and ensure that children have lots of opportunities to lead their own play.

Building children's resilience helps to develop their skills and abilities to deal with life's challenges and being able to bounce back from them. Building resilience can help children to overcome the disappointments that can affect their motivation. When observing children practitioners need to tune in to each child's motivations in order to identify where they can provide support when things go wrong or do not turn out as a child expected, it is important encourage children to keep going, look at what can be learnt from the experience and to discuss how the child can approach the next attempt. Talk about what went wrong and why this might have happened and encourage the child to think about new ideas they can try.

Self-regulation

Nancy Stewart, How Children Learn: The Characteristics of Effective Early Learning.

“Self-regulation is increasingly seen as one of the most important factors in successful learning and success in wider life. It has two basic components, emotional self-regulation – which sits within Personal, Social, and Emotional Development – and then cognitive self-regulation. That’s the way that we think and learn.”

In other words, if you look after emotional self-regulation, and you see the characteristics of effective learning taking place, then you’re well on your way to providing a quality learning environment.

“The learner does the work and it is the characteristics which are the driver of the whole experience, so the stronger those are, the stronger the learning is.”

Creating and Thinking Critically (Thinking)

Creating and thinking critically (thinking) - children have and develop their own ideas, make links between ideas, and develop strategies for doing things.

Young children are naturally curious about the world around them and seek to build meaning from their experiences. Think about your role play/ home corner and observations of children re-enacting experiences from home or family adventures, e.g. acting out a family dinner or a child playing with the cars holding up a blue car and saying, ‘my daddy has a blue car’ as they make links and notice similarities.

Imagining possibilities is exciting, finding out that there are many different ways to achieve a solution/result and discovering this for yourself or with a small team can support children’s engagement and motivation to pursue their goals, testing out their ideas and thinking creatively about possible alternatives and solutions.

It is important, as a practitioner, to enable children to investigate problems for themselves. When wanting to be helpful and supportive it is easy to rush in too early and solve the problem for the child by suggesting a solution, restricting their opportunities to try out their own approaches and theories for themselves. The only way in which children can learn about trial and error and problem solving is by doing it themselves and witnessing the different results of their actions. Provide the resources needed and be ready to support the investigation with some sensitive questions, ‘how are you going to do that? What might happen if you? What else can you try? Where might you find something to stick it with?

Review your environment and look at the chances children have to investigate their ideas and test out their theories e.g. babies are provided with treasure baskets with objects to explore. Are children enabled to lead their own play and follow through with their ideas without being stopped because 'that isn't supposed to be used like that' or 'that's not where that goes'. Practitioners should follow the child's lead, 'that's really interesting, I wonder what will happen?' 'I am not sure, what do you think?'

Sustained shared thinking

Sustained shared thinking is a key support mechanism for aiding children to think critically for themselves. It is described as:

"an episode in which two or more individuals 'work together' in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, ex-tend a narrative etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend".

(Sylva et al, 2004, EPPE Report)

In practice sustained shared thinking is usually an in-depth conversation between an adult and a child discussing an idea with both sharing their thoughts and ideas or looking to seek a solution to a problem together, with both participants learning something from the exchange.

If you haven't tried this before you can start practising, think about using open ended questions (such as the ones above) and encouraging children to lead with their ideas with you joining in as a co-learner with the child.

References

- EYFS Statutory Framework 2021: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework--2>
- Birth to 5 Matters 2021: <https://bit.ly/3AFb9vI>
- Nancy Stewart: Interview: family, 2019
<https://www.family.co/blog/nancy-stewart-interview-the-characteristics-of-effective-learning-family>

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Factsheet

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We are the voice of the 21,000-strong nursery sector, an integral part of the lives of more than a million young children and their families. We provide information, training and advice to support nurseries and the 250,000 people who work in them to deliver world-class early learning and childcare.

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